

Letters

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Scientists and the CIA

On 24 January I was visited by a representative of the Central Intelligence Agency. He asked me for information about the direction being taken by certain foreign scientists in the field of neurophysiology. I felt I should not

give him this information. I discussed my reasons with him, and he left.

A request of this type places a member of a university faculty in a very difficult position. Any knowledge or skill one has is freely available; if a colleague had asked me the CIA questions I would have replied without hesitation. But there must be another side to this coin of academic free speech: one should reasonably ask the questioner to share the same ethics and tell you specifically for what purpose he intends to use your information. If one is responsible for the information one hands out, one is also partially responsible for any use to which it is put. A professor's duty is to profess, but he must remain in a position to assess the consequences of his profession. A second consequence of a relationship between scientists and the CIA would be to limit the freedom of discussion between American and foreign colleagues. No one speaks to an official, however sympathetic, as freely as one speaks to a friend. We have all had the experience of talking to foreign scientists who were certainly part-time intelligence agents and part-time scientists, and these conversations are so mutilated as to be a travesty of the usually free exchange and argument of a scientific discussion. Any general and indiscriminate questioning by the CIA of scientists, in fields such as the life sciences which are normally free of security restrictions, increases the danger that American scientists will be regarded by their foreign colleagues as government agents, as these colleagues now regard scientists from some other countries.

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makes necessary the existence of unfortunate agencies such as the CIA, but one hopes that their activities can be sufficiently restricted so that the entire scientific community does not become involved. As the scope of these agencies enlarges, anything can become grist for their mill; let us hope that academic freedom is not included.

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